



STRATEGIC NATIONAL ARTS ALUMNI PROJECT

DataBrief

DataBrief provides arts educators and arts policy makers with highlights of SNAAP data and insights into the value of arts-school education. Contact us for more information.

Arts Graduates in a Changing Economy (part 1)

This DataBrief highlights some of the findings in a recent special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* (ABS) titled "Arts Graduates in a Changing Economy." The [special issue](#) engages with SNAAP findings and themes discussed at the 2016 *3 Million Stories* conference, covering several topics of interest both to academics and the broader arts community: the cultures of arts schools; job outcomes after college; the geography of artistic work; creative identity; and the multiple conceptions of creativity.

Thanks to Alexandre Frenette for editing the ABS special issue as well as coordinating this DataBrief.

The Economic World Obverse: Freedom through Markets after Arts Education

Alison Gerber (Lund University) and Clayton Childress (University of Toronto)

The growth of arts education in recent decades has allowed for the flowering of teaching as a legitimate career path for artists—one where they can make a living *as artists*. The old "those who can't do..."; canard no longer holds, if it ever did. Teaching and other work in nonprofit environments creates markets for artistic skills and artistic services and has transformed the landscape of artistic practice.

In [a recent article](#), we show how central these "alternative" markets are to artistic practice today using arts education as an exemplary case, and argue that traditional analyses of artists and their lives rely far too heavily on the markets for artistic objects—sculptures, paintings, book manuscripts—to understand much about the lives of artists, for whom the creation and sale of such objects is just one part of a creative career.

In our article we focus on writers and

visual artists. These are conservative cases, where SNAAP data show that “only” 45% of arts alumni who majored in writing and 59% of those who majored in visual arts work or have worked as teachers. Other majors are even more likely to teach, and the trend for teaching increases among those alumni who are, or have ever been, professional artists (see table below).



Engagement in Teaching Work (Current or Past) by Status as a Professional Artist, by Major

Major	All arts graduates	Current and former professional artists	Current professional artists
Writing	44.6%	56.6%	59.1%
Visual Arts	58.6%	64.4%	65.6%
Dance	82.4%	90.0%	92.1%
Music Performance	82.1%	88.7%	90.6%
Theater	56.7%	62.9%	65.9%
Numbers	44,046	34,166	24,525

Source: Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, 2011, 2012, and 2013 administration data.

In the article we build on our extensive research with [visual artists](#) and [fiction writers](#) to show how artists move beyond the market / autonomy dichotomy to create careers in and through multiple markets.

Commercial art, art for art’s sake. It’s a useful binary, right? It splits the art world into two teams, simplifies the world and serves it up for our understanding. But if you want to understand today’s art worlds, it’s the wrong story—at least if you want to understand the lives of the vast majority of artists working today, rather than the lives of a few art objects. Research on artists and their work, and even vernacular understandings of the things artists do, generally rely on the assumption that artists compete primarily in highly unequal winner-take-all markets for art objects. That assumption promotes an image of art worlds split between those who make art for such markets and those who run from them, noses in the air, competing only for the esteem of others in their avant-garde circles.

But such images are dangerously out of touch with contemporary artistic practice. These assumptions define paid work like teaching as a sort of self-subsidization of artistic practice that threatens to hinder or overtake “real” artistic careers, blinding us to the vast majority of



artistic lives and incomes and delegitimizing much of the work that makes up artistic careers. We show how a more holistic view can help us to disentangle the relationships between what appear to be distinct market and nonmarket activities, and suggest that artistic autonomy should be understood in relation to artistic practices across diverse and complex markets. And we show how narrow the received vision of legitimate artistic activity is, compared with the ways that artists construct and view such legitimacy in practice.

Artists today are likely to see teaching careers, especially in higher education settings, as *ideal* artistic careers, rather than second-best art-adjacent work. Many who do not have permanent teaching positions dream of them. One artist, a tenured professor, told us: “I always thought that maybe teaching one day would become part of what I do because I like that work. That kind of work is so energizing and rewarding in its own way. I just love that kind of constant learning, that way of interacting with students, this no-two-days-ever-alike kind of thing. I love all of that.” (p. 1542)

In art schools, students are taught—both explicitly and implicitly—many of the skills traditionally necessary for artistic careers. But art school culture, like social scientific analysis, has most often clung to an old-fashioned view of artistic practice, leaving students ill equipped for the rich and diverse art worlds that await them.

As teaching, project-based work, grant writing, and other nonprofit work are today elements of standard artistic careers—likely to be incorporated into portfolio careers by even the most celebrated artists—the skills necessary for such work should, we believe, be offered as part of formal artistic training. If we can acknowledge that such work is a regular and normal feature of legitimate art careers, we might better prepare students to take advantage of the opportunities that will open to them across art worlds, preparing the next generation to successfully live and work as artists.

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